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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000330

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SUBJECT: ABD AL-MAHDI CLAIMS HE IS HIS OWN MAN

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: At a February 3 dinner hosted by Minister of Planning (and senior Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK) official) Barham Saleh, Deputy President Adel Abd al-Mahdi told the Ambassador that, if chosen to be Prime Minister, he would not be beholden either to SCIRI head Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim or Iran. Abd al-Mahdi explained that, although Iraq needs good relations with its neighbors, concerns about growing Iranian influence are the result of propaganda designed to smear SCIRI. Iraq must work with the U.S., he noted. Abd al-Mahdi also said that he has accepted the Ambassador's idea of a national unity government consisting of Shia, Kurds, Sunni Arabs, and secular Iraqis from the bloc led by former PM Ayad Allawi. Abd al-Mahdi said he also is in favor of dividing government ministries into three baskets: security, economics, and services, each to be headed by a Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) or a special assistant to the PM. When the Ambassador pushed for the adoption of a program that would unite the next Iraqi government, Abd al-Mahdi agreed. END SUMMARY.

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Questions Regarding Abd al-Mahdi's Independence  
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¶2. (C) At a February 3 dinner hosted by Minister of Planning Barham Saleh, Abd al-Mahdi asked the Ambassador to help convince Fadhila Party General Secretary Nadeem al-Jabiri to drop out of the race for PM. Abd al-Mahdi said that Shia independent Hussein Shahrastani already has decided to drop out of the race and that Shahrastani's supporters would throw their weight behind Abd al-Mahdi. With the Fadhila Party's support, Abd al-Mahdi said, he would almost certainly become PM.

¶3. (C) The Ambassador replied that there are concerns about a possible Abd al-Mahdi premiership. Ambassador said that there is a perception that, if Abd al-Mahdi were to become PM, SCIRI head Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim really would be the one running Iraq, and Iranian influence in Iraq would increase. The Ambassador asked Abd al-Mahdi what kind of assurances he could offer that this would not occur.

¶4. (C) Abd al-Mahdi countered strongly, arguing that his relationship with Hakim was such that he could be frank with Hakim. Abd al-Mahdi said he sometimes has disagreed publicly with Hakim during Governing Council meetings. Furthermore, Abd al-Mahdi claimed, concerns about Iranian influence in Iraq are the result of propaganda designed to smear SCIRI. Abd al-Mahdi argued that Iraq needs good relations with its neighbors, but must work with the U.S. as well. For example, a possible U.S. withdrawal from Iraq would not be in the interests of either Iraq or Iran. Abd al-Mahdi also said that, if it were true that Iran is arming and supporting terrorists, he would confront the Iranian government.

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The Shape of the Next Government  
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¶15. (C) Abd al-Mahdi said he has accepted the Ambassador's idea of having the various government ministries divided up into three baskets: security, economics, and services, each to be headed by a DPM or special representative of the PM. Abd al-Mahdi said, however, that he doubts the Kurds would accept this. Abd al-Mahdi recommended that Barham Saleh should be a DPM, and he agreed with the Ambassador's idea that Iraq should have a National Security Council -- but argued that it should be an advisory rather than a decision-making body (reftel).

¶16. (C) Abd al-Mahdi told the Ambassador that he supports the Ambassador's plan to form a national unity government comprising Shia, Sunni Arabs, Kurds, and secular Iraqis led by former PM Ayad Allawi. The UIC 555 coalition, Abd al-Mahdi said, also would accept Allawi's participation in a national unity government. When the Ambassador suggested that Allawi might be appointed DPM in charge of security, Abd al-Mahdi balked. Although he personally would not object, Abd al-Mahdi said he did not believe the rest of the UIC 555 coalition would accept this. Instead, Abd al-Mahdi suggested that Allawi could be Minister of Defense (MOD). Abd al-Mahdi said that Grand Ayatollah Sistani does not object to Allawi's participation in the government, despite the former PM's Ba'athist roots.

¶17. (C) Barham Saleh added that the Iranian Ambassador had met with TNA speaker Hajim al-Hassani and told him that Iran would not object to Allawi's participation in the next GOI. Abd al-Mahdi argued, however, that if Allawi becomes MOD,

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then the Minister of Interior (MOI) should be someone who has the support of the UIC 555 coalition. Qassim Daoud would make an excellent MOI, Abd al-Mahdi said. He asked the Ambassador to discuss this with Qassim.

¶18. (C) The Ambassador said that the Embassy is working on a program of action for the unity government. Abd al-Mahdi agreed that this would be a good idea and suggested that the Ambassador pass the proposals to Saleh, who could then build upon them.

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Comment  
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¶19. (C) COMMENT: How a possible PM Abd al-Mahdi would be perceived by Sunni Arabs, Kurds, or secular Iraqis remains an issue. Questions remain about his independence from Hakim and his willingness to stand up to Iran. Thus far, however, Abd al-Mahdi has said the right things. He appeared to the Ambassador to be sincere when he said Iraq needed to cooperate with the U.S.

¶10. (C) COMMENT CONT'D: Allawi's apparent willingness to accept some other job in the government besides PM should be viewed as a positive development. At a lunch hosted by PM Ja'fari on February 3, Allawi told the Ambassador that he had met with Hakim the previous day. Allawi described the meeting as very positive. Allawi said that he has had a long-standing relationship with the Hakim family, and he recounted to the Ambassador how he used to travel from his home in Baghdad to visit the holy shrines in Najaf. While in Najaf, his family would visit the Hakim family home and young Ayad would kiss the hand of Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim's father, the late Grand Ayatollah Mohsin al-Hakim. It remains to be seen if this long-standing relationship can help foster an effective, cross-sectarian government. END COMMENT.  
KHALILZAD